

Award-winning Palm Beach garden is 'historic, seamless, timeless'

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REAL-ESTATE

This restored Palm Beach garden is 'historic, seamless, timeless' — and award-winning

The homeowners and landscape architect who restored the famous gardens of Palm Beach's Villa Giardino have been honored by the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach.

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It was a case of serendipity when John Jeffry and Elizabeth Louis first saw historic Villa Giardino — and just as importantly, its remarkable gardens — near Worth Avenue in Palm Beach.

“We stumbled upon it,” Jeffry Louis recalls. “We feel so blessed.”

It was 2021, and the couple was not looking to buy a home in Palm Beach. But as sometimes happens, things changed quickly.

“It was providence,” Elizabeth says, recalling how a longtime friend from Chicago, Palm Beach real estate agent Lisa Cregan, took her to the property at 341 Peruvian Ave., just east of Coconut Row.

Once Elizabeth stood before the villa’s open door and the 1920s-era residence and gardens unfolded before her, “it was *un coup de foudre*, an immediate love affair,” Elizabeth says.

Her husband soon learned about the house from his wife.

“I was in London and Elizabeth sent me a message that this place was incredible, with a picture (of the gardens from the second-floor loggia), but that it was too big a project for us,” Jeffry says.

Yet even from that photo, the property’s appeal proved too potent for him: “I wrote back, ‘Let’s buy it.’”

They did just that — and were soon putting into place plans to restore the house and gardens.

Four years later, the Louises and their landscape architect, Mario Nievera of Nievera Williams Design, accepted the Palm Beach Preservation Foundation’s annual Lesly S. Smith Landscape Award.

The early-evening ceremony in late March took place in the main section of Villa Giardino’s Italianate garden, which is hidden behind a tall wall that fronts Peruvian Avenue. The wall is punctuated by a picturesque metalwork gate set into a Palladian-style brick-accented arch.

“I knew the house — everyone does,” Nievera says. “It’s apparently the most photographed façade in Palm Beach. And it is true, when walking out there any day, I see someone there taking a photo or a photoshoot happening.”

But he had never been inside the gate, he adds.

“I knew certain things about it, and when I was invited inside to meet Elizabeth, she asked as we walked around, ‘What would you do (to the gardens) if I hired you?’”

Nievera, who knows a good thing when he sees it, had a ready response even if it wouldn't prove quite accurate. He told her he wouldn't change a thing.

“There were a lot of existing elements in the garden that I thought were worth keeping, so many that I thought we should just work around the elements and make improvements.

“I thought I was talking myself out of a job, and I left — but Elizabeth thought that I gave the right answer.”

With the project completed, Jeffry acknowledges that Nievera had exactly the right idea from the get-go.

“The most important thing we did are all the things we didn't do,” says Jeffry, a board member of Gannett, which owns the Palm Beach Daily News and The Palm Beach Post among its newspaper holdings.

Elizabeth adds: “Mario has a sophisticated eye and he has a gentle touch. He is very sensitive and discerning.”

In 2021, the town deemed the villa to be a historically significant building, a designation that signals that a house contributes to a neighborhood's architectural character but doesn't necessarily qualify for the more stringent “landmark” designation. The program for historically significant buildings offers qualifying homeowners who want to renovate more leeway from the town's strict zoning rules than if they were starting from scratch.

The garden was originally developed in the late 1920s by Manhattan antiques dealer Ohan Berberyan. In 1931, with architect Marion Sims Wyeth, he built a showroom with a second-floor apartment. The building featured reassembled architectural elements imported from Venice.

Berberyan opened the landscape to the public in the 1930s as a tourist attraction named Berberyan Gardens. Later, the building was turned into a single-family residence, with an addition in the 1960s attributed to Belford Shoumate.

The garden comprises more than half of the property. The main section of the landscape — with its formal, geometric-patterned parterre garden in the Italian style — stretches east of the house. A set of broad brick steps leads up to the pool area, which is sheltered by the two wings of the house. Throughout the landscape are antique statues and garden ornaments originally imported by Berberyan.

The landscape was showing its age when Nievera first saw it.

“Some little areas were ignored and (had been) left alone, but for the most part, the garden was well established. But it was not in great condition,” Nievera explains. “The (domed) podocarpus hedges surrounding the parterre garden were beautiful, as well as gardenias and bougainvillea trees near the pool and the bougainvillea covering the front façade.

“There was beautiful statuary, stonework and brickwork everywhere,” he adds.

Getting down to work, Nievera immediately noticed a troubling challenge.

“You couldn’t get out to the garden from the old villa,” Nievera explains. “It was an awkward situation that had to be remedied.”

Plans for the landscape project coincided with a renovation and restoration project of the house, led by Palm Beach architect Richard Sammons of Fairfax, Sammons & Partners with Chris Glapinski serving as the project architect. Nievera worked with the two men as he envisioned the hardscape elements.

Sammons describes the steps taken to overcome the lack of access to the garden from the living room in the original part of the house. The building was “four feet below grade on the north side, and the south side was at street level. Sitting in that room, you felt like you were in a racquetball court,” Sammons says.

An excavation project “allowed the room to be opened up to (a new) sunken terrace. And we negotiated the grade against the side of the pool that allowed for a (waterfall-style) fountain to announce the pool’s presence,” Sammons says.

That project and others, Nievera adds, created a more cohesive link between the home’s interior and exterior.

“Now, you see the garden and you are connected to it. And you can walk out from the old villa into the gardens, which you couldn’t do before,” Nievera says.

The waterfall fountain was an idea that originated with Elizabeth, who was inspired by one she had seen in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat in southeastern France.

“We were out to dinner at a friend’s place, and there was this fountain where water sort of pooled over the edge. I sent a video (of the fountain) to Mario, and he said, ‘Let’s do it.’”

Elizabeth also found two Italian lion statues that now flank the waterfall feature as well as marble panels in Italy that have been placed on the walls in the sunken garden area. Nievera surrounded those panels with stephanotis vines.

With the new terrace, the estate’s drainage needed to be updated. “In the northeast corner of the property, we had to put in a drain field, which necessitated putting in a new

garden over it," Nievera says. "It's something that you (peer) into. The idea was to have dinners in that garden eventually when the trees grow in."

Meanwhile, the main parterre garden, which features four quadrants, needed to be completely restored, Nievera says.

"It had these low-border boxwood hedges that were failing, and inside the hedges were flowers. So we ripped out the boxwood and planted carmona hedges, and we replaced all the flowers, planting white begonias."

Each parterre is now centered by a calamondin citrus tree.

Another project involved transporting a large banyan by crane into the northwest garden. Nievera also redesigned the main driveway, replacing the brickwork. And for an area just inside the garden gate, Sammons designed a canopy structure to shade the Louises' antique Fiat Jolly.

There was at least one other serendipitous moment: Elizabeth discovered a rusty pipe hidden within some hedges, the remnants of a fountain. To bring it back to life, she searched diligently until she found an authentic rosso Verona marble mask to finish it.

Looking at the garden today, Nievera says, "it feels like nothing was done. It's historic, seamless, timeless, and it's not perfect but it's absolutely stunning. There's a patina to it that you don't get in newer gardens, and the patina adds to its beauty."